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Community and Identities

Interrogating Contemporary Discourses on India

Surinder S Jodhka

The notion of community is being invoked not only by social scientists engaged in understanding Indian social and political processes, but also by parties on the right and the left in their mobilisation and in the official discourses on development law and common civil code. But in most of these discourses, the internal structure of the supposed communities invariably gets elided in favour of a notion of moral bonds and cultural authenticity.

THE decade of the 1980s in India will be remembered for many things. Apart from other changes and shifts, it was in the 1980s that the new social movements emerged in India. The 'new' mobilisations by women, farmers, dalits, tribals and ethnicities raised issues and demands that could not be easily understood or dealt with in the then dominant theoretical and political paradigm, the paradigm of development. They questioned the basic premises of the state-directed developmental programmes, being pursued with much enthusiasm in the name of welfare and progress. Coupled with other changes, the 1980s saw the erosion of the 'Nehruvian agenda'. This 'paradigmatic crisis' also provided a context for new debates on subjects like secularism, development and modernity, eventually leading to important theoretical shifts in social scientific enterprise and its research agenda.

Prominent among these was an increasing preoccupation with the study of social identities, such as nation, ethnicity, gender and caste. Questions of identity and culture had perhaps never been so important for the social science disciplines of sociology, anthropology, history or even geography as they are today. This new interest in identity is not confined to India alone. At the global level also the study of culture and identity have become major themes for research, particularly after the emergence of various kinds of separatist movements and ethnic conflicts in different parts of the world.

While these 'new' trends have definitely helped in opening-up fresh questions for research and politics and offer useful frameworks for social analysis, in certain instances they have also led to the revival of some 'old' concepts. 'Community' is one such concept that has been invoked rather frequently and often uncritically in a variety of contexts. Together with 'civil society', the categories of 'community' and 'identity' have come to dominate the social scientific discourses on India. The contemporary revival of 'community' is perhaps best exemplified by the manner in which questions of environment, displacement, ethnicity, diaspora, human rights, and caste politics or even health are being articulated today.

The notion of community has also been invoked by an increasing number of social scientists who are critical of understanding Indian social and political processes through the western categories, particularly the categories that give centrality to the so-called 'rational individual'. Many of these scholars, sometimes also called 'nativists' or 'post-modernists'/'post-colonialists', have argued that there was a need to give some kind of political recognition to the fact that in the Indian society, community linkages and loyalties continued to be important in the everyday lives of the common people. For some recognition and revival of community was important because it could become a medium through which one could counter the growing violence and alienation in our society and protect the native cultural traditions. For others, recognition of community differences was important for a genuine democratisation of the Indian society. It was only through such recognition, they argued, that the process of homogenisation that was first initiated by the colonial rulers but was being continued by the post-colonial state as well, could be countered.[1] Sarah Joseph has recently argued that despite variations in their positions, the 'communitarian' thinkers in India, more or less, agree on: the advocacy of the politics of difference; accepting communities as legitimate actors in the democratic politics; and a project of giving voice to the subalterns [Joseph 1997:2517].

The new discourse of community is not confined to academics alone. It has permeated the ideologies of political parties on the right and the left, and is freely used to consolidate support for struggles against a variety of enemies, be it the multinational corporations, globalised media, consumer culture or in communalist mobilisations. The category is being extensively used in the articulations of contemporary identitarian politics. Even in the 'official' discourses on contemporary India like those of development, law, or the common civil code, the notion of community is invoked rather frequently. 'Communities' are being viewed as 'some of the most active agents of political practice' [Chatterjee 1998:282]. In most of these discourses, the internal structure of the supposed communities invariably gets elided in favour of a notion of moral bonds and cultural authenticity.

In order to examine and interrogate the contemporary discourses on Indian society, the department of sociology at the University of Hyderabad organised a national level workshop on March 19 and 20, 1998, where scholars from different parts of the country presented their working papers by taking up different contexts of the uses of the concept of community in identitarian politics as well as in other contexts. The papers presented could be broadly divided into two categories. In the first category were the papers that dealt with conceptual issues relating to the two concepts, community and identities. In the second category were the papers that took up specific contexts or case studies of various identitarian movements where the notion 'community' has been invoked as a central category.

Community and Identities: Conceptual Issues

In the opening paper on 'Conceptualising the Concept of Community in Indian Social Science: An Anthropological Perspective', Carol Upadhya contended that community had played a central role in the development of sociological discourses on India. There had been a long tradition of 'imagining' India through the categories that constructed it as the oppositional other of the west. India was often seen as an example of *Gemeinschaft* (or the community) type of social organisation, composed of primordial bonds of blood, territory and culture. The Indian social institutions –

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jati, village, religious sects – were often seen as examples of traditional communities. At the other end, the modern western society was defined as being characterised by individualism and associational institutions, the *Gesellschaft*. While much had been written about community/individual, east/west and other such dichotomies, Upadhya pointed out that there was yet another dichotomous pair embodied in this discourse which had rarely been talked about and which might actually be even more fundamental: the opposition between the realm of culture and that of economy. One of the forms in which this opposition between culture and economy appeared in the Indian context was in the 'caste vs class' debate of the 1970s where for both sides caste was defined as some kind of socio-cultural unit or an ideological system based on the religious system of hierarchy, and class was seen as an economic phenomena. Another problem with this conceptualisation of caste was that in this framework, castes or jatis were defined not only externally in terms of their position within a hierarchical structure but also internally in terms of relations of kinship and marriage, a kind of 'primordial' unit that came to be equated with community, which in turn was identified as the locus of cultural tradition and identity.

The outcome of this theoretical trajectory was the identification of 'culturally' defined groups (ethnic, religious, caste) as the authentic units of social organisation in India. The recent assertions by communitarian writers that the 'real' submerged community had supposedly been repressed by a non-authentic and all powerful state, itself a product of imposed and alien 'modernity', had given a new lease of life to a notion of community that had its roots in the older sociological tradition. This she called the substantivist approach to community in Indian sociology.

There was also another approach to 'community' in India, as Upadhya pointed out, a constructivist approach. According to this position, most of the communities that we see today and the identities on which they were based, were not survivals from the pre-colonial times but were the creations of colonialism. Following Foucault, many of the constructivists had argued that through its disciplining and authorising practices, it was the colonial state that created a civil society in line with the demands of governing and controlling large populations. One example of this tradition was Dirk's thesis on caste. According to him, Upadhya stated, the colonial regime robbed the caste system of its former political base and reconstructed it as a primarily religious or cultural institution that came to be seen as the authentic basis of Indian society.

Much of the recent works on ethnicity and nationalism in other parts of the world had also moved towards a constructionist approach. Operating in a very different notion of culture, the recent anthropological works on identity had pointed out that it was no longer possible to presume that a social identity or tradition linked to a particular 'community' had an autonomous or authentic existence, and that it had been simply appropriated for political ends by an identitarian movement. Rather, traditions and identities were seen to be constructed in complex ways in an ongoing process of cultural production, which included politically motivated objectifications of culture, embodied in emblems of identity which represented the distinctiveness of the community or ethnic group. Thus, constructivists would argue, to understand the formation of any particular identitarian movement or social collectivity, one must look at its cultural specificities and the political and historical context in which it had arisen, and at the ways in which particular symbols or practices had been invoked and reworked by people in their strategies aimed at producing active political collectivities.

However, the constructivist position was also not free from problems. Taking on from some of the recent debates in American anthropology, Upadhya pointed to objections raised against the constructionist position. The constructionist position like the substantivist or the 'primordialist' notions of community, claimed to be located outside the identity politics and spoke from an objectivist/modernist stance. This raised questions about the politics of the constructivist position itself. There was no free market in the interpretations of the past. While on their part, the constructivists might be trying to argue against the tendency to reify communities and identities, the other side saw their theories simply as reassertion of the representational authority of scholars *vis-a-vis* indigenous groups. Further, by insisting on the fact that all identities were constructed, such a position tended to disempower those who were working within the identitarian politics.

Commenting on the Indian context, Upadhya contended that while the constructionist position was put forward for colonial discourses and practices as sources of modern identities, it had not yet been extended up to the present to examine the ways in which such identities continued to be politically constructed. Also, she underlined the need for understanding the relationship between academic knowledge and the knowledge practices of the state or the social movements. Further, much of the recent literature produced by the communitarian scholars continued to work with the 'culture-economy' dichotomy assumption. There was a tendency to valorise community as an authentic social unit and a political actor because it was seen to belong to the realm of culture and was often counterposed to the supposedly non-community formations – state, market, class – that were by definition viewed as non-cultural and therefore non-Indian.

Another paper, 'The Eclipse or the Renaissance of "Community"' by, Ravinder Kaur, also focused on conceptual issues. Travelling through a history of the concept of community, Kaur explored the relationship between 'community', civil society and identity. In much of the western classical evolutionist social science, 'Community', Kaur argued, was often viewed in positive terms, though simultaneously imagined as something that belonged to the past. However, within the western sociology, there was also a tradition that viewed community negatively. The Chicago school, for example, conceptualised city as a space devoid of community. Community, for them could be found only in the neighbourhoods inhabited by the new migrants from rural settings, in the ghetto and the slum. These communities were viewed as the survival of primordial values that could be potential sources of tension and violence in cities.

In the next part of her paper, Kaur pointed to the critical place that the nation state had come to acquire in the contemporary political discourses. Following Partha Chatterjee, she argued that capitalist society was able to ideologically reunite capital and labour at the level of the political community of the nation. The nation state defined itself in terms of an oppositional other of the natural and primordial community. This European idea of nationhood that privileged the nation as the only legitimate form of community over most of the other forms of communities and identities, Kaur argued, had been duly propagated in the post-colonial third world societies as well.

Further she pointed out that in much of the contemporary discourse on 'state and civil society', state was represented as despotic, overbearing and a site of control, while the civil society was viewed as the victim to be saved and protected. However, such an uncritical and romantic view of

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the civil society and community, Kaur argued, could have its own problems. Civil society could also be a site of contention and competition. Communities, she argued, were not homogeneous entities; they consisted of a variety of groups differently and unequally placed within society. They constituted themselves through symbolic processes in order to claim space for themselves, in order to protect their privileges, structures of prestige or to prevent their annihilation. Also communities had two different faces. One, as it appeared to its members from inside; and two, what it looked from outside to others.

Through an exposition of some of the recent writing of Partha Chatterjee, Sasheej Hegde in his paper on 'Identities?' initiated a discussion on the question of modernity as a contextual/contested terrain. He quoted from Chatterjee that "one ought to question commonsensical notions about the existence of certain universally held values of modernity" and suggested that "modernity was a contextually located and enormously contested idea". "True modernity consisted in determining the particular forms of modernity that were suitable in particular circumstances". Chatterjee had underlined that "by teaching us to employ the methods of reason, universal modernity enabled us to identify the forms of our own particular modernity".

Production of a distinctly national modernity that was different and suitable to our circumstances was the cultural project of nationalism. Today in the age of globalisation, the tendency seemed to be more towards homogenisation and there seemed to be an emerging conflict between 'modernity' and 'democracy'. Thus, there was again a need to 'mobilise the courage' that marked the nationalist phase. One possible way of doing this, as Hegde cited from Chatterjee, was to "take a fresh look at some of the conceptual components that claimed to tie together local structures of community with territorial nation-states". One needed to "understand the structure and dynamics of mass political formations in twentieth century nation states". Further, it would be useful to think of a 'domain of mediating institutions between civil society and the state', a distinct sphere of what Chatterjee called, 'political society', a concept that could help us go beyond the traditional/modern dichotomy. Although community had a very tenuous place in the western liberal theory of civil society and state, "in the new political society of the east, communities were some of the most active agents of political practice". For Chatterjee the solution to this problem was possible through the use of his concept of 'political society' which could enable us to understand our own specific form of modernity. This was an answer that emerged from within the project of modernity.

In his concluding remarks Hegde contended that Chatterjee's theoretical solution seemed to give much significance to the question of location (their vs ours). The problem however, was not "in determining historical inheritances, plainly not only a question of location, about whether there can, or need be, only one historical heir; but this is as much true about them as about us".

In yet another paper on conceptual issues, E Haribabu argued that the popular representations of the 'scientific community' as "an exotic group insulated from the wider society" had serious limitations for understanding the cognitive and social organisation of science. Following this he also made a general comment on the notion of community itself. In plural societies like India, he argued, representations of communities as distinct and unique world-views tended to fragment the society. It also undermined the possibilities of trans-community alliances. He pleaded that the social scientists needed to look at the internal differentiation among groups and 'communities' that could open up possibilities of alliances among those sharing similar material conditions for creative political action.

Spatiality and Communities

In his paper on 'Thinking Spatially about Communities', Satish Deshpande argued that despite its enthusiasm for the blurring of boundaries and the seamless implosion of locality into globality, the burgeoning literature on globalisation told us very little about the concrete spatial re-articulations effected by globalisation. An apparatus attuned to change, movement and incongruity could not help being relatively insensitive to the counter-pressure exerted by the resilient but unspectacular continuities present in every specific context. Moreover, the sharp focus on the local and global extremes of the spatial spectrum left blurred the intermediate levels of micro-region, region or nation state.

Thus, Deshpande suggested that there was a need to work against the grain of the globalisation literature in order to highlight the sub-global spatial processes involved in the formation of communities and the political harnessing of socio-cultural identities. The intermediate levels being the key to a grounded understanding of contemporary spatial re-articulations, not all of which were well served by the omnibus label of 'globalisation'. Basing on the work he is currently doing on the 'Bombay Karnatak' region of northern Karnataka, and the city of Hubli, he offered two illustrations in support of his argument: the first emphasised on the raw materials and the social mechanisms involved in the fashioning of a cultural (in this case, regional) community; the second looked at the more active aspect of community identity and its recruitment for particular political agendas in the case of the flag hoisting controversy at the Idgah Maidan in Hubli. He also pointed to the significance of addressing methodological questions, such as, what could/should count as evidence for arguments in this area? How could such evidence be collected?

Commenting on the political harnessing of identity in the region and the Hubli town, he attempted a comparison of the spatial aspects of two Hindu communal campaigns, the Ayodhya (Babri Masjid/ Ram Janmabhoomi) campaign; and the flag hoisting campaign at Idgah Maidan, Hubli. He argued that due to the specific spatial geography of the city, and the location of the Maidan, the underlying justification for the campaign in case of Hubli was less abstract (and hence more dependent on the concrete experience of the Maidan site) than in the Ayodhya case. He concluded his paper by reiterating the importance of intra-national, i e, regional and sub-regional, levels in understanding the significance of globalisation. For it was only when we were able to compare how identities were formed/harnessed 'before' and 'after' globalisation that we could evaluate the difference made by this process.

'Community' and its Mobilisations

As mentioned above, the focus of the workshop was on the ways in which the category of 'community' was being mobilised and invoked in order to articulate various forms of politics ranging from identitarian mobilisations to environmentalist movements. Much of discussions in the workshop were mostly centred around, what Upadhya called, a constructivist notion of community.

A R Vasavi, in her paper on 'Narratives in the Re-Constitution of Communities', argued that in the contemporary political discourses on India, much attention was being paid to the increasing presence or emergence of 'communities' as 'political actors' in the public domain of the nation, and to the resulting community-state interfaces. The literature on the emergence

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of communities as 'political actors' tended to assume their ability to contest and challenge dominance especially when their cultural and economic rights were threatened. However, the terms by which the communities were being reconstituted were not so simple in nature.

Narratives from the nation state, capital and culture combined in various ways and degrees to re-constitute communities. Vasavi argued that invariably the ability of different communities to challenge state dominance and capital narratives or to emerge as effective 'political actors' was dependent on the class and caste position they occupied in the national stage. While the communities located closer to the political and economic centres of the nation and those who enjoyed a high social and ritual position were able to galvanise and pit themselves against others in the public domain and influence the state or the capital to suit their interests, others who lacked political, economic and social bases remained marginal and silent despite significant re-constitution of their community structures and identities.

Vasavi also pointed to the variations in which communities experienced and engaged with the 'private' and 'public' domains. While the poor and marginalised had experienced an erosion of their private domains, marked especially by the intrusion of the state into their reproductive capabilities, productive activities and their cultural representation, the rich were witnessing a retrieval and expansion of their private domains. The public domain was also experienced differently by the poor and the rich. While the public domain was more accessible to the rich, its access was limited to the poor. The variations in the re-constitution of communities and their position *vis-a-vis* the public domain was also the undergrid of the constitution of the larger civic community.

She elaborated her arguments by taking up three case studies. First, the lingayats of karnataka, who, in order to reconstitute themselves into a community were engaged in turning cultural images into sectarian icons; second, the nadars of Tamil Nadu, who had successfully reconstituted their community through 'a narrative of capital'; and third the spate of suicides by farmers in north Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh.

By privileging norms of productivity over ecological sustenance, independent success over collective growth, income gencration over equitable distribution of resources, the agencies of nation state and capital had altered the logic of agrarian life. But unlike the nadars who could exploit these opportunities offered by the expansion of markets to reconstitute their community, the marginal farmers became victims of the new narratives of the nation state and capital. Participation in commercial agriculture also meant a disengagement of these farmers from their previous social and cultural ties with the village. The loss of crop or indebtedness thus become individually and singularly-borne burdens. It was this form of construction and experience of crop loss that accounted for the spate of suicides by farmers in a region that had a history of frequent and prolonged periods of crop loss, from either drought or pest, but there were no records of suicides in the past. In the pre-capitalist agrarian settlements members of the 'community' came together at crisis times despite the glaring disparities prevalent in the agrarian structures. The increased integration of agriculture into the market economy had not only separated the economic sphere of life from the social and cultural spheres but had also made the latter subordinate to the former.

Communities and Popular Culture

Speaking from a feminist standpoint and placing herself on the side of those who had critiqued the 'nativists' and the 'communitarians', Sharmila Rege in her paper[2] entitled 'Some Issues in the Conceptualisation of Popular Culture of Communities: The Case of 'Lavani' and 'Powada' in Maharashtra' contended that timeless and undifferentiated conceptions of the indigenous, recoveries of Indian self and communities had little for those pursuing a feminist and anti-caste political agenda. A boom in cultural studies in the north American academia had also led to a boom in studies of third world histories and cultures, characterised by a back-to-community approach. Invoking Sarkar, she pointed to how the class and material critiques of capitalism had been replaced by a critique of colonial discourse. The politics of recognition had come to replace concern for economic justice.

Empirically, her paper focused on a mapping of the shift in use of the concept of popular culture of communities, worked out through a historical account of the changing forms and representations of Lavani and Powada art forms of Maharashtra. The Lavani (an erotic folk form of dance) and the Powada (ballad) had persisted as popular forms of culture even as their content and form had undergone several transformations. These forms had been 'produced' for different sections in society at different times. Her paper traced these processes of production of the popular, of appropriation of the form for social mobilisation by political groups and for identitarian politics across shifting sites of religion, castes, regions and lately diasporas. Through a teasing out of the internal hierarchies within the 'supposed community forms', her paper tried to underline the impossibility of a sharp demarcation between the alien and the culturally authentic and indigenous.

Community and Conservation

In her paper on 'Cultural Conflict over Conservation: Eco-development in the Great Himalayan National Park, India', Amita Baviskar provided an account of the interface between 'community', state and the market. Covering an area of 765 sq km in Kulu district, the Great Himalayan National Park (GHNP) came into existence in the 1980s under the Wildlife Protection Act. A conflict had been going on in the area between the forest development bureaucracy and the local population over the villagers' rights to the resources within the park. Baviskar argued that the state discourse on conservation of bio-diversity and eco-development often pitted the local communities against wildlife. The local communities were invariably represented as the main agents of degradation and, in such a discourse, a transformation in their way of life was seen to be crucial for the transformation of the landscape they inhabited. The basic thrust of eco-development was to divert biotic pressure from the protected area. Though it was

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quite like other programmes of rural development, it began with the assumption that wildlife conservation was a priority that overrode people's rights to resources within the protected area. Thus, the underlying philosophy of eco-development of the post-independence state was not very different from the colonial rulers with regards to the rights of the local people over the forest resources. The local people invariably suspected the instrumental concern the state agencies showed towards harnessing indigenous culture by removing human pressure on natural resources and by creating alternative economic opportunities for them.

From the very inception, the GHNP project provoked a fierce controversy between the forest department and local villagers over the meanings and motives of eco-development. Claims about culture, resource use practices, worldviews and knowledge were central to this debate. Through the help of a non-governmental organisation (NGO), the villagers contested the assumption that local resource use was inimical to the objectives of wildlife management. The NGO argued that the traditional resource use by the local villagers was based on sound ecological principles that had always promoted, or at least maintained the interests of wildlife. By posing local management practices as superior to the scientific claims of the park authorities, the NGO could shift the terms of the debate away from a 'park versus people' confrontation to a scenario in which village and wildlife came to be projected as having common interests which stood threatened by a forest department bent upon disrupting the fine ecological balance between the two.

However, the notion of 'indigenous culture' that naturalised and legitimised claims of villagers to graze livestock or to collect medicinal plants inside the park also had other implications. In re-inventing themselves, villagers froze their culture in time and space what was fluid and varied on the ground. Villager's actual practices did not necessarily conform to the idealised notion of 'culture' that the NGO/villagers projected. While reasserting the role of indigenous knowledge and challenging the scientific hegemony of the forest department, people had been compelled to construct a new myth, glorifying the traditional culture and representing it as timeless and unchanging.

Further, all villagers were not equally enthused by such a representation of the village culture and community. The extent to which different villagers supported the political use of such a representation was closely related to how they were responding to the opportunities opened up by changing institutional structure, particularly the market. With the expansion of road network and improved transport and communication, the economy in the region had undergone drastic changes. Horticulture had emerged as a lucrative alternative to subsistence agriculture. Enhanced link with cities had also fostered the collection of medicinal plants. Commercialisation of 'traditional medicines' had created a new market for the locally grown medicinal plants. Different species of plants began to be collected in bulk and were sold to the traders. While the local traders made profits, the increased demand for medicinal plants also fed the poorer families. The economic differentiation in the village community also influenced the political responses of different categories of villagers to eco-development. It was the poorer and middle income sections who provided the groundswell of opposition to eco-development. Even among these sections, the younger generation was more inclined to learning skills that got them jobs in the town and the servicing sector. However, even though the trend among the better off sections and the younger generation was towards the market, they appreciated the importance of 'indigenous knowledge and local culture' as a purely political symbol of strategic value in mobilising their community against the state.

Caste and Community

As mentioned earlier, community is not merely a category that is being used in the social sciences, it has permeated even the popular political discourses and it is being used and deployed by various social movements to articulate their own self-identity. The discourse of community has recently become quite popular in the caste politics. The workshop had two presentations on the subject.

In his talk on 'Dalits in Search of Community', Gopal Guru offered some critical observations on the ways in which the discourse of community was being increasingly invoked in different articulations of the contemporary dalit politics in India. He emphasised the need of contextualising this increasing use of the concept of community. There was a need to ask questions like where such a debate was being carried out? Who was involved in such debates? And why was one involved in such a discourse?

Guru argued that at a time when there was a widespread process of the decomposition of communities, there seemed to be an attempt at constituting dalits into a community from many different quarters. It was not only the colonial state that had vested interest in reconstituting dalits into a community. Even the modern Indian state had stakes in such a process. The Indian state was trying to constitute dalits into a 'dole receiving community'. This project of constituting dalits into a 'dole receiving community' also had support from some of those who claim to represent the dalit interests.

The community logic seemed to have become so overpowering that even if an individual dalit wished to escape it, he/she was not allowed to escape. The reservation policy, for example, was being seen as a community resource rather than an individual right. If a dalit had taken up a job under the reservation quota, the 'community' raised objections if he/she wished to change the job for the fear of it being de-reserved. The community logic had become so widespread that when a dalit male wanted to marry an upper caste girl, the 'community' opposed it and he was accused of distorting the communitarian resources.

D Parthasarthy in his paper on 'The Ambiguities of Categories: Community and Identity in the Kapunadu Movement' provided an account of the manner in which the discourse of community was used in the caste mobilisations in Andhra Pradesh. His main focus was on a movement that brought various 'backward' castes in state together. Though the immediate issue was an instrumental one: inclusion of these caste groups into the official list of backward classes for the reservations, the mobilisations also led to the formation of a new identity.

The movement took off in 1985 with the formation of Kapunadu Mahasabha bringing under its umbrella several cultivating caste groups with a similar position in the caste hierarchy, below the dominant castes and above the dalits. Attempts were made to imitate the mobility patterns of the kammas, by forging marriage alliances across regions and sub-castes and by setting up educational institutions. Though their success was limited, the rhetoric was primarily used to popularise the notion of community. Further, the movement was also directed against the overall dominance of the kammas in the coastal region. However, kammas being referred to as a community in the popular usage, Parthasarthy argued, kappus, by a dialectical process began to see themselves as an exploited and dominated 'community' rather than simply as a backward 'class'. The objective class

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situation of the majority of the kappus, largely poor peasants and urban lower middle classes, alienated and insecure by nature, made them adopt the intermediate category of community rather than class or caste for self-identification.

The social movements and identities in the region reflected the absence of a developed industrialised capitalist economy and the consequent lack of a fully developed class structure. The ambiguity of community in Kapunadu epitomised the class location of kappus within an economic structure characterised by rural-urban capital flows, and the presence of the same dominant class in both rural and urban areas with similar patterns of social, political and economic behaviour.

Religious Communities

More than anywhere else, it is with reference to the religious groups, particularly the minority religions, in India that the term 'community' was deployed most commonly. This frequent use of the term to refer to the minorities has created a general impression that followers of the minority religions constituted homogeneous groups. Such an impression obviously has political implications. There were several papers focusing on various aspects of the 'religious communities' in India.

Rowena Robinson in her paper 'Fluid Boundaries: Christian Communities in India' contended that when viewed as groups at the level of sustained social action and interaction, lifestyle, custom and mores, the so-called religious communities, showed themselves as fractured if not, indeed sequestered entities, each having a different history and social trajectory. Thus, she argued, when we talked about the Indian Christians, we need to look at them as different communities, belonging to various denominations, each arising out of a particular social milieu and drawing on it in construction of its own identity rather than one single 'community'. Though there was a sense of association between separate groups due to their formation into larger bodies, distinctiveness marked the everyday life.

Drawing on regional traditions, different groups constituted their identity in unique and complex ways. There had been a variety of diverse ways in which the Christian communities had negotiated their relationships with the regional Hinduism and the local cultures in the drawing of group boundaries. The relationships of missionaries or converts to their own culture and to the state authorities; the relationship of the converts with the missions, their own expectations of it – both social and material; their location within the particular regional socio-cultural order; and the character of their association with other social groups within that order were some of the elements that played important roles in these negotiations.

The constitution of community identity for different regional groups in relation to the cultural patterns within which they were embodied included idioms of caste, ritual and symbolic codes, ideas of kinship, patrimony and marriage. She elaborated in her paper on how the converts carried their caste identities with them even as they shed their religious affiliations. This was particularly the case when conversions took place on group basis. Further, those from the upper castes invariably refused to give up their caste entitlements and carried them across the 'religious' divide. She also pointed to the fact that the Christian missionaries had not always and everywhere unequivocally opposed caste, or all its implicated distinctions.

Pointing to some of the recent trends within the Indian Christianity, she emphasised that identities do not remain immutable and unchanging. Identities of Christian groups were being reconstituted today in radically new ways in the complex social and political environment. One such example was that of the coming together of the church as a whole in support of the political mobilisations by the dalit Christians demanding the reservation benefits as given to the scheduled caste Hindus.

There were two papers dealing with aspects of the Muslim community. As a part of his broader project on 'how people negotiated between large- and small-scale identities, and how they actively engaged in the construction/destruction of different identities', Syed Ali in his paper on 'Marriage, Caste and Muslims in Hyderabad' examined the different 'strategies regarding caste considerations in marriage' among the different groups of Muslims in the city. On the basis of his ongoing fieldwork in the city, he argued that in deciding who married whom, the importance of caste varied between different categories and groups of Muslims in Hyderabad. There were three major strategies regarding caste in marriage: first, to downplay caste and ethnicity in favour of other factors such as wealth and education; second, to allow caste to play some role in matchmaking process; and third, to treat caste as a predominant concern. These three were not always exclusive strategies. They, at times were also mixed up. By examining the patterns of marriage, and the factors that went into deciding who married whom, he tried to show how the importance of caste varied between different categories and groups of Muslims.

He argued that caste among the Muslims in Hyderabad was something like a 'symbolic ethnicity', a kind of leisure time identity that had no socio-economic or political repercussions. The symbolic caste lacked any kind of semblance of community, of marriage circle, of boundaries.

In another paper titled 'Of Rushdie Affair and Community Descriptions', Rekha Pappu provided a map of the way media recorded the controversies around *The Satanic Verses*. Through a discussion of the newspaper debates, she examined some of the conceptual certainties that directed the debate primarily in relation to issues such as 'sovereignty', secularism and modernity. She tried to explore different moves by which the identity of the 'Muslim community' was fixed in the media debates.

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The framework within which the question of human rights was raised in the debate tended to equate human rights exclusively with individual rights. Such an equation was premised on configuring of the notion of faith or certain expressions of it as the obverse of modernity. By the very logic that had constituted the modern notions of freedom, faith became a matter of personal resolution and its public expression was thereby rendered absurd. Empirically her paper was focused on the debates that were carried out in the Indian context and on how the anxieties and aspirations were articulated and endorsed in the process of the Rushdie debate here.

Community, Identities, Politics

As mentioned above, the issues of community and identities have acquired compelling significance today not merely because of the academic interests in these questions, but mainly because since early 1980s, the discourse of community had come to be used in the different types of identitarian movements. Most important of these being the communalist mobilisations that acquired a new dimension during the 1980s. Sujata Patel in her paper, 'Shiv Sena, Culture and Community', argued that it was no more possible to explain phenomena like the Shiv Sena through conventional methodological tools that looked at the way such a formation articulated its ideology. Such an exercise did not help much specially in case of the Sena because one often found contradictory versions being articulated.

She argued that in order to explain the consolidation of its social base in Mumbai, particularly during the 1980s, one needed to understand the connection between the restructuring of the urban economy of Mumbai and the rise of Sena. She asked for an ethnographic approach to understand the manner in which Sena carried out its political mobilisations. The arrival of Sena politics had shifted the locale of political mobilisations from trade unions to residential units. Therefore, one needed to look at the 'site of social organisation of the new economy'. These sites were those areas where the production of food, leisure and space took place. The 'vada pav' stalls, the video parlours, the club and bars, the paan shops, the retail trade outlets, the film industry, the cultural festivals all became sites for social organisation as well as for the construction and transmission of the meanings. Locality was often valorised in such mobilisations and was used for violent interventions. The politics of space reinforced the fetishism of locality and one found a spurt of violent activities. Through this wave of political presence an incremental presence was posited rather than an expansion of a democratic space through redefining of the state-society relationship as it generally happened in identity movements.

In the concluding paper G Haragopal spoke on the 'The Rise of Hindu Fundamentalism: Brahmanism vs Bahujanism'. He dwelt on ideological and institutional aspects of the brahmanical Hinduism and the manner in which it had developed over a long period of time. While at the level of ideology, Hinduism appeared flexible and catholicist, at the level of practice, it tended to be rigid and obscurantist. The obvious proof of this was the caste system, which had 'an authoritarian hierarchical order and rigidly laid down boundaries and barriers for social interaction'. It was because of these oppressive practices that a large number of dalits had converted to Islam and Christianity in the past. In more recent times with the introduction of judicial reforms and some developmental programmes, dalits had begun to assert themselves in a different mode. The rise of bahujanism was a direct consequence of these changes.

Reflecting on the rise of the dalit identity movement in form of bahujanism, Haragopal argued that though this movement has had many positive effects, it still was to mature into an effective intervention for social transformation. On the postitve side, bahujanism had been able to create new consciousness among the poor and had been able to mobilise them into effective electoral alliances. In the process, it had worked as a 'speed-breaker' against the Hindu fundamentalist politics. However, the excessive emphasis on identitarian politics had also created some knotty problems for the bahujan movement. It tended to overemphasise the caste question and tended to target the brahmins alone in its cultural struggle. There was a need for the bahujan movement to enter into broader alliances with other democratic movements for a viable transformative movement against brahminism.

As suggested in the title itself, the main thrust of the workshop was on critical interrogations of the contemporary discourses on India by focusing on the twin concepts of community and identities. While the participants were critical of the different ways in which the notion of community was being invoked by different identitarian movements as well as in some other contexts and most speakers used the term community in double inverted commas, the mood was not one of dismissiveness.

Notes

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1 In its most simple form, such a view could be found in the writings of Vandana Shiva and Ashis Nandi. Attributing the crisis in Punjab during the 1980s to the success of green revolution technology, Vandana Shiva, for example, argued that the violence in the state was a direct consequence of the developmental process experienced during the earlier two decades. According to her, the extensive use of 'external inputs' not only changed the ecological process of agriculture but also transformed the structure of social and political relationships. It weakened the earlier relationships based on mutual obligations among cultivators within the village and made them more and more dependent on the market. Thus for her, it was the breakdown of the village community that explained the violence in Punjab [Shiva 1991]. Similarly, Ashis Nandy has been arguing that much of the religious and ethnic violence in the contemporary south Asian societies could be attributed to the forced breakdown of the 'traditional community' by the dominant westernised ruling elite in these societies. In his defence of the 'traditional community', Nandy has argued that the project of development and secularism brought with it the callous impersonality and massification of market-driven societies that destroyed age-old institutions of sociability and community-living without putting anything else in their place. The traditional structures, as he would argue, were not simple and inflexible. Left to themselves, these community structures had more effective civilisational resources than the institutions of the modern state to resolve disputes, tolerate differences and allow for the development of a better-adjusted and more accommodative personality. The crucial institutions here were those that belonged to the 'little traditions' of local community life which were the product of many centuries of coping with social change [as summarised in Chatterjee 1998]. In a different way, scholars like Chatterjee and Kaviraj have argued for the need to recognise the significance of 'community' for understanding the political process in contemporary India [Chatterjee 1994; Kaviraj 1992; for a brief summary see Joseph 1997].

2 Sharmila Rege could not come for the workshop but had sent her paper which was read by Aparna Rayaprol.

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